

UK Educators Rank-and-File Committee holds second meeting

Our reporters

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Tania Kent opened the second online meeting of the UK Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) second Educators Rank-and-File Committee by welcoming those "participating in many parts of the world, including the United States, France, Spain, Germany, Australia and many parts of the UK.

"This attests to the global character of the issues that confront educators the world over and this is also expressed on the panel of speakers and contributors today," said Kent, a leading SEP member and special needs teacher.

The aim of meeting was to call on educators, students and parents to join and build the committee "in your workplace, college or campus and communities."

Worldwide, the death toll from COVID-19 "is fast approaching one million," with "many hundreds of thousands of deaths to come as country after country witnesses a massive resurgence of infections."

At the committee's first meeting one week previously, there had been eight schools in England that had reported COVID-19 infections since reopening. At the end of last week, "1,118 schools had been hit by coronavirus infections, forcing many to close partially or fully. This number is rising rapidly." Some 25,000 teachers in England had been forced out of the classroom and into self-isolation amid a national shortage of COVID-19 tests due to the inability to process them.

"The 'world-beating test, track, and trace' system which we were promised has collapsed in just two short weeks, unable to cope with the level of demand, which the government knew would happen." This had placed massive strains on teaching staff and managers. Four in five schools have children not attending because they could not get a test, and almost 50 percent of schools have staff off because they cannot get a test.

"A survey from Education Support showed more than half of teachers saying their mental health had declined during the pandemic, with the lack of timely government guidance cited as their biggest challenge."

The essential demand that must be advanced "is for the immediate closure of all schools and their reopening only when it is safe to do so. Walkouts and strikes must be called for in all schools, leading to the fight for a general strike across the UK. This will not take place through placing demands on the unions. ... They support the reopening of schools and oppose any demand for militant action."

Evan Blake, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (US), reported how Educators Rank-and-File Committees had been set up in New York City, Detroit, Florida, and Texas, with plans to announce additional committees soon in Los Angeles, San Diego, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Hawaii and other parts of the US.

Blake showed a slide with the images of five teachers who had died since schools began reopening in the US. Millions of students and tens of thousands of educators had been sent back to schools for some form of in-person instruction, which, along with the widespread reopening of college campuses, had led to a surge in COVID infections.

"There were hundreds of outbreaks of infections in July, which made

national headlines and forced the closure of many schools," he said. "In response, districts and states moved to quickly cover up future outbreaks, creating regimes of censorship and punishing teachers and students that spoke out."

No one was keeping accurate records of outbreaks in schools. Hundreds of protests have broken out among teachers, parents, and students. "Over 100 Facebook groups have formed to oppose the reopening of schools, many with tens of thousands of members. Where schools have reopened, there is growing support for strike action to force them to close again."

The chief obstacle preventing this from taking place was the teachers' unions.

Miles Driver, a member of the recently founded London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, sent recorded greetings as he was working that day. "As London bus drivers, we speak from experience about the deadly effects of COVID-19. Between March and May of this year—in little more than 12 weeks—33 London bus workers, 29 of them drivers, were killed by the virus."

These deaths "were the outcome of the Tory government's refusal to impose a national lockdown until March 23, more than one month after scientists warned such action was needed."

Driver indicted Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, who had told the public that London passenger transport was safe, personal protective equipment (PPE) was not required, and "all they needed to do was wash their hands to the tune of happy birthday."

The unions had signed a tripartite agreement with TfL (Transport for London) and the bus operators behind the backs of transport workers, then issued joint letters to drivers pledging "industrial harmony" and telling them that PPE was "not required."

Alex Lantier, the national secretary of the Parti de l'egalite socialiste in France, said workers across Europe faced the "malign indifference to COVID-19 of officials determined to force workers back to work, and children back to school, no matter what the cost in lives.

"In France, 3,082 new COVID-19 cases were detected on August 31, as schools were set to reopen. Yesterday, there were 13,215." Since schools had reopened, "new cases have roughly doubled each week, and COVID-19 emergency wards are filling up in Bordeaux and Marseille."

Together with the German unions, France's General Confederation of Labour (CGT) had co-signed its approval of this July's €750 billion European Union corporate bailout. Due to the collapse in their dues base, 90 percent of the French unions' budgets came from business or public subsidies. "French education unions have therefore made no strike calls, though one smaller union initially proposed to delay school reopenings by one week."

WSWS writer Alejandro Lopez told the meeting that the back-to-school drive implemented in Spain by the Spanish Socialist Party-Podemos government with trade union support was catastrophic. Last week, the Madrid region announced that 66,000 educators should undergo coronavirus antibody tests before school started. More than 2,000 tested

positive.

The Spanish government was following a “herd immunity policy,” allowing the virus to spread without restraint. “The Socialist Party and Podemos bear full responsibility for the tens of thousands of infections in recent weeks, and for the wave of deaths that tragically are ensuing and will ensue.”

Retired tutor Kevin, with two school-age children, told the UK educators meeting, “Like many families around the world, we’ve been horrified at the drive to return children into a setting that isn’t safe.”

“Teachers and educators have been left completely unsupported by the unions,” Kevin said. “We sometimes feel, as concerned parents, that we’re just operating in our own ‘bubble,’ on our own. And, of course, the *World Socialist Web Site* gives us some comfort when we read the news on there. But it just absolutely hammers home for me this—it’s absolutely crucial that there’s an organised response to the crisis that we all face.”

Another attendee, James, added, “COVID-19 spreads in crowded, poorly ventilated spaces with no social distancing and little use of masks. How can the UK government continue with their messaging that schools and colleges and universities are safe when they know they are not?”

Danny, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), explained how he and hundreds of thousands of students were set to return to universities just as COVID-19 was spreading rapidly once again.

“There has been a 43 percent increase in infections this week alone, driven by a huge spike in cases amongst 17- to 29-year-olds—the same group that will be returning to campuses. The rate of infection among this age group is now more than double the national average and rising.”

Students had been told they should return to their institutions, and if they did not, they were still expected to pay the same inflated tuition fees of £9,250 for online learning and only limited access to resources. “This situation is even worse for foreign students, who have to pay £21,000 a year to attend university, even if they decided to not return to campuses. More and more students are struggling to support themselves, with one in five unable to pay their rent. Many universities are seeing up to an increase of 190 percent in applications for hardship funds.”

Danny said it was urgent that students and educators take matters into their own hands and place no trust in the government, fake opposition parties or the university institutions. “Campus safety committees must be built to ensure appropriate safety procedures are put in place to protect the health of students and staff, and fight for increased testing on campuses.”

Stephen, who is about to begin his degree course, said, “For students like myself, our experience of the government’s handling of this pandemic and its impact on our education can be characterised as insincere and reckless.”

Having recently finished his A-levels, Stephen related how the “standardisation algorithm” used to determine grades showed “in black and white that the government did not care about our teachers’ judgements based on talent, work ethic, perseverance and evidence, and that it would be the backgrounds we came from which would be the deciding factor in what grades we should get.”

The effect of the algorithm had raised the top grades obtained by students at private schools by 4.7 percent, whereas in Scotland’s most deprived areas, the proportion of students receiving A-C grades was reduced by 15.2 percent. “This was met by the outbreak of organised, student-run demonstrations, protesting the blatant classism with signs stating, ‘Judge my schoolwork not my income.’ If there is something I have learnt from my experience through the A-level situation, it is that students can and must take back control of the terms on which their education proceeds.”

University lecturer Simon described the measures taken by the universities and government as arbitrary and contradictory. “While some

learning is going ahead online, face-to-face classes are still going ahead, especially for medical and veterinary qualifications.”

Although smaller class sizes were supposed to take place in large lecture theatres, to reduce the possibility of transmission, “none of the universities, neither the Russell Group top tier, the ‘redbrick’ establishments, nor the former polytechnics have enough lecture theatres to service the increased number of seminars created by smaller class sizes.” This meant face-to-face teaching in normal size classrooms with inadequate ventilation.

The University and College Union (UCU) refuses to take any industrial action to protect the lives of its members in higher and further education, Simon said. “This week, I received an e-mail from UCU leader Jo Grady containing pro-forma letters for union members to send to their employers if they do not feel safe at work.”

Secondary school teacher Tom told how staff had been put into unsafe schools and had had to move around school grounds to teach in different classrooms across hundreds of children.

“We are not told when a child is sent home with a suspected case of COVID-19 and there are huge problems with testing, so children are absent for days. The situation is unsustainable—teachers cannot go on like this.”

The role of the unions had been to “provide the political cover to implement the government’s back-to-work agenda, ensuring that their members went back to schools.” At every point as the pandemic progressed, the education unions essentially sided with the government and against their own members.

The National Education Union (NEU) was complicit with the government in keeping schools open. As early as March, Mary Bousted, joint general secretary, had said she “understood” why the government wanted to keep schools open. “They are a major public service. Having your child at school allows parents to work. The NEU understands the value of schools for the economy.”

In conclusion, Tania Kent urged all those present to join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee and to attend the meeting on Saturday, September 26.

The video of the meeting can be viewed on YouTube.



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